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Networks and mobility: A case for complementary pathways

Martin Wagner & Caitlin Katsiaficas

Complementary pathways have gained much prominence in recent global and European policy discussions as an innovative and new tool to broaden and scale up third-country solutions for refugees. Indeed, the need for ramping up access to durable solutions for refugees is pressing in the face of ever longer-lasting conflicts and far too low resettlement numbers. While complementary pathways are commonly considered as new legal pathways that need to be developed for refugees, thereby perpetuating the narrative of refugees needing support while neglecting their human and social capital, various examples show that refugees do possess and use existing pathways and seek individual solutions outside of the refugee regime—if their resources and networks allow them to do so. Based on various examples, this *policy brief,* therefore, argues that facilitating movement for forced migrants based on their human and social capital could become the key added value of complementary pathways.

Central findings and policy implications

1 Refugees use their social and professional networks to seek third-country solutions if their human, social, and financial capital allows them to do so—often without even entering into any formal refugee regime.

2 While the most vulnerable refugees require a high level of support, which is offered through (admittedly little) resettlement, the key added value of complementary pathways could be to support refugees whose human or social capital exists but is too weak to seek third-country solutions on their own.

3 Devising strategies that develop and link networks in major host countries with those in potential destination countries farther afield and creating favourable entry conditions for refugees could become essential building blocks for complementary pathways.

4 The German Western Balkans Regulation, community sponsorship or similar initiatives are examples of the opportunities created by networks and offer a plethora of findings that could further develop complementary pathways for refugees.

5 From a governance perspective, complementary pathways are at the cross-section between protection and regular migration on the one hand and home and development/humanitarian affairs on the other. Progress on complementary pathways, therefore, requires overcoming sectoral governance approaches and seeking synergies between these spheres.

1 An introduction to complementary pathways

How the concept developed

"Complementary pathways" is quite a recent term in international protection. Nearly 20 years ago, Noll (2003, p. 11) referred to "protected entry procedures" when he considered "resettlement alone as too mono-dimensional and too limited to bring relief in the[access] crisis." Some 10 years later, Hein and Donato (2012, pp. 24-29) referred to "complementary forms of access to protection" to describe "diplomatic asylum, protected entry procedures, resettlement and evacuation and dispersal."

At the global policy level, the term 'complementary pathways' most likely premiered in the 66th Standing Committee of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which looked into new approaches to expand access to solutions for refugees. Since then, the term has become increasingly prominent in global protection discussions, ultimately finding its way into the New York Declaration. This landmark document listed complementary pathways in line with the three traditional durable solutions (return, local integration and resettlement), suggesting the emergence of a fourth durable solution. The resulting Global Compact on Refugees contained multiple references and an entire chapter on

complementary pathways (section 94). Additionally, a concrete initiative developed out of the Global Compact, the CRISP - Sustainable Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Initiative, led jointly by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR to support stakeholders in creating and expanding refugee resettlement and complementary pathways.

At the EU-level, institutions have brought forward policy options for the establishment of "safe and legal avenues" (European Parliament, 2016) to enable protection seekers to reach the European Union or "orderly and safe pathways to the EU for third-country nationals in need of protection" (European Commission, 2016). While the European Commission published recommendations for EU member states under the Commission Recommendation on enhancing legal pathways for persons in need of international protection in September 2017, complementary pathways as such only entered EU asylum and migration policy under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, introduced in September 2020. With the Recommendation on legal pathways to protection in the EU: promoting resettlement, humanitarian admission, and other complementary pathways, released alongside the New Pact, the Commission is promoting the use of complementary pathways for those in third countries who are in need of international protection.

What complementary pathways are now

Since complementary pathways emerged, policymakers and scholars have tried to conceptualise and define them; however, these efforts have met with limited success. Rather than developing a concrete definition in both academic and policy circles, they list various initiatives that may fall under the complementary pathways umbrella, such as humanitarian visas, humanitarian admission, community sponsorship, or existing legal pathways for family reunification, education opportunities, employment opportunities or "other opportunities" (UNHCR, 2019). Complementary pathways in this respect are described as "migration channels which, though not always originally designed for international protection, can complement resettlement schemes" (OECD, 2016).

There have been several attempts to categorise complementary pathways. For instance, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) differentiated between forms of legal admission rooted in the international protection regime (resettlement, humanitarian admission programmes, private sponsorship and humanitarian visas) and those rooted in regular migration and mobility schemes (family reunification, labour migration and education mobility) (ECRE, 2017). More recently, Wood (2020) distinguished between needs-based (e.g. humanitarian visas or humanitarian admission programmes) and qualification-based (family, employment or education) complementary pathways on the one hand and 'custom-made' complementary pathways versus regular migration channels on the other. The latter refers to whether the pathway has been specifically developed for refugees or whether it is generally open for migrants, including refugees.

Despite their growing popularity, not everyone agrees with the concept. Of particular concern are pathways that are not specifically designed for refugees and displaced people (i.e. non-humanitarian, regular migratory pathways) and that offer for some only a temporary solution. Additionally, while complementary pathways are heavily promoted in global and EU policy documents, they have so far triggered less interest among states. The narrative that refugees need protection and support above all else does not fit with the image of refugees capitalising upon their resources, connections and skills to access third-country solutions beyond the classical ones reserved for them, namely resettlement, humanitarian admission or claiming international protection upon arrival in a destination country. With refugee issues usually separated from legal migration agendas, one of the challenges of promoting complementary pathways is to identify policymakers responsible for taking up the issue (i.e. which department or ministry). Complementary pathways are, therefore, one of the cases where the strict divide between categories like migrants and refugees is unproductive (Wagner, 2017).

What complementary pathways could be

Complementary pathways thus far have been addressed via a top-down approach. Global and EU policy documents (e.g. the Global Compact and New Pact on Migration and Asylum) address states and encourage them to provide pathways that refugees and displaced people can access. While laudable, the development of this policy approach is largely detached from displaced people and their social capital (family ties or professional networks), their human capital (skills) or their economic capital (financial resources).

Complementary pathways could well be understood as an intermediate third-country solution between resettlement and legal pathways, which may overlap in both directions (see Figure 1). Resettlement as a protection tool offers a third-country solution to the most vulnerable refugees—those who have no social or professional connections or financial means. Well-connected refugees, on the contrary, may fully rely on their own capacities (financial means or skills) and social relations (strong professional or private networks) to find protection and better long-term opportunities on their own. They are likely to use legal migration pathways. Complementary pathways, in turn, may offer third-country solutions for those in-between. As will

Figure 1: Third-country solutions for refugees
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be presented below, refugees are striving to capitalise on their networks and find a solution to their displacement, which includes mobility via existing migratory pathways. In this sense, complementary pathways can help to bring and settle refugees in third countries by supporting them in building new networks and leveraging or restoring interrupted and weak networks. Complementary pathways, in this understanding, shall not necessarily provide new pathways that offer more exclusive mobility rights to refugees but rather shall develop policies that allow them to use their social capital, skills and resources as well as their professional or social networks.

2 The potential of networks for tapping into mobility

The role of networks

The role of networks, particularly migrant networks, has long been emphasised in migration theory and academic debate. Migrant networks have been conceptualised as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin" (Massey et al., 2005, p. 42). More recent discourses, however, show that the understanding that migrants are mainly navigating within migrant networks only addresses part of the plurality of existing networks. It neglects the relevance of other facilitators such as universities, employers or governments, and the rising role of the Internet in providing access to information and new networks via various online platforms or social media (Meeteren & Pereira, 2018). However, they also acknowledge that the social capital potentially available in networks is not always made readily accessible but rather "needs to be mobilised through networking strategies" (Meeteren & Pereira, 2018, p. 941). This points to the importance of cultivating and leveraging refugees' networks.

The research project Transnational Figurations of Displacement (TRAFIG) investigates the importance of mobility and networks in finding solutions for displaced persons facing protracted situations. The central hypothesis is that the more connected and mobile refugees and displaced people are, the less likely it is that they end up in situations of protracted displacement and vice versa. TRAFIG research in the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and Europe shows that displaced people rely heavily on their capital and networks. Their networks may include family members or friends living abroad, professional connections in other cities or countries or educational prospects. However, it is not just the quantity of contacts but rather their quality that influences the opportunities these networks can help unlock (for more, see Etzold et al., 2019). Thus, while refugees seek to tap into their networks, policymakers and practitioners can play a role in supporting the building and strengthening of these networks (Katsiaficas et al., 2021).

Existing pathways that leverage networks

Several existing pathways tap into these personal and professional networks, either at the individual or organisational level, and overlap with many of those channels deemed to be complementary pathways.

Naturally, family relations (often) offer powerful networks and notably come with a legal right to **family reunification** for refugees. Migration pathways for family reasons have traditionally contained elements of sponsorship, including proof of employment, financial means or adequate housing. Exceptions may be made for certain groups of sponsors, most commonly for refugees and those with subsidiary protection. However, family reunification is mostly limited to nuclear family members and thus does not address more distant relations. Moreover, displaced people often face particular barriers to family reunification as they often cannot obtain birth and marriage certificates and other documents due to the specific circumstances under which they had to flee.

Another way networks have been leveraged is **scholarship programmes** in various countries like Mexico, Japan or Australia **for students who have been displaced** (Wood & Evans, 2020). In Europe, the Portuguese-led Global Platform for Syrian Students started to build networks for students already in 2013 to receive education or finalise studies that were interrupted by the conflict in Syria.

On refugee **labour** mobility, the organisation Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) has received perhaps the most attention, as it is the most advanced example. In essence, TBB connects the talents and skills of refugees in major hosting countries like Jordan or Lebanon with employers in Western countries via a specifically designed "Talent Catalogue". Other initiatives look into intra-EU mobility based on refugees' skills, as explored by the EU agency Cedefop or moveurope!. Numerous civil society networks like Startup refugees in Finland, More than one Perspective in Austria and Workeer in Germany have emerged at the national level to connect refugees with employers, while businesses are also creating networks, such as the TENT Partnership for Refugees.

A tool that has received much attention of late is **community sponsorship**, a community-based approach mostly linked to resettlement schemes that enables private citizens and organisations to welcome refugees to their country. Under Canada's long-standing programme, community sponsorship can facilitate the actual journey of refugees to the country and also assist with their reception and integration. However, the concept of community sponsorship is flexible and can be applied to various migration pathways beyond resettlement. Indeed, it offers an array of possibilities for communities, civil society and the private sector to engage in welcoming refugees. It thus creates

an umbrella for all sorts of networks that can support refugees. However, existing networks such as family relations often do not play an important role or are even considered as a hindrance to community sponsorship. Many current community sponsorship programmes, such as those in the United Kingdom and Germany, do not provide the option to select family members or 'name' other persons to sponsor, even though many refugees and other migrants living in Europe and other third countries have frequently requested this and would be ready to set up supporting communities to welcome members of their own networks.

Digitalisation also offers plenty of opportunities to bridge long distances and make translocal and transnational networks come alive. These include opening up new opportunities, markets and networks to people who would otherwise be marginalised from mainstream economic avenues by virtue of their displacement (Easton-Calabria, 2019). Digital platforms may also increase the visibility of refugees' human and social capital to employers or universities abroad (see various examples in Easton-Calabria, 2019, p. 9).

Leveraging networks to enable mobility

Particularly in the EU context, complementary pathways are mainly discussed with respect to new or alternative migratory routes. However, pathways do exist, and networks appear to be vital in accessing these. Once a network offers a solution (e.g. a job offer, student scholarship or family reunion), states should facilitate entry by, for instance, easing requirements such as qualifications, student certificates, marriage documents or other formal requirements which refugees may not possess, or by broadening the definition of family members who can be reunited.

The rationale for eased entry seems justified when the purpose of migration has been defined, and a network (community sponsorship, the family, a university or an employer) is in place to welcome the refugee and support them in settling in. As it was put, "contemporary approaches toward forced migrants focus on securing protection and providing assistance, not on facilitating movement" (Aleinikoff, 2018, p. 1). In this vein, facilitating movement for forced migrants based on their human and social capital could become the key added value of complementary pathways.

When networks meet mobility: Germany's Western Balkans Regulation

Although the German Western Balkans Regulation (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, n.d.), introduced in 2016, does not address people in need of international protection per se, it is an example of the power of networks to foster mobility. This policy opened the German labour market to all skill and qualification levels of migrants from the Western Balkans, including low-skilled migrants. Instead of calling for certain language or professional qualifications, the regulation requires applicants to have been offered a job from an employer in Germany for which no eligible candidate in Germany can be found.

Five years after the regulation took effect, the first evaluations documented that, between November 2015 and May 2020, around 244,000 preliminary approvals for applicants for employment from the Western Balkans in Germany were granted; 57,750 were rejected (Brücker et al., 2020). For the purpose of this policy brief, the assessed importance of networks is even more relevant: According to a report by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the majority of the regulation's beneficiaries relied on personal or professional relations. Only in some isolated instances did citizens of the six Western Balkan countries benefit from the regulation without the support of any networks (Brücker et al., 2020).

Ultimately, the combination of networks and the facilitation of mobility allowed approximately 98,000 citizens from the Western Balkans to arrive and work legally in Germany based on this regulation and to meet the needs of the German labour market. This model does not need to be limited to the Western Balkans and could well be used to expand solutions via more mobility options for refugees.

3 The role of networks and mobility for complementary pathways

Forcibly displaced people are certainly not a homogenous group—not only because of their varying nationalities or ethnic backgrounds but foremost because of the different levels of human, social and financial capital that they possess. Indeed, as outlined by UNHCR, "how a displaced person fares in the future, whether in the country of asylum or origin or in a third country, depends on the skills, experiences and qualifications, mental and physical health, material assets and attitudes maintained and developed while displaced" (2016, section 6). While this is true for local integration, it is also true regarding third-country solutions.

As visualised in Figure 2, the human, social and financial capital of refugees not only has a substantial impact on third-country solutions that are open to them but also on the level of support they need to compensate for no or weak human, social or financial capital. This policy brief argues that three general groups of third-country solutions can be envisioned to correspond with different refugee profiles:

1. Those with strong networks and financial means need little to no support to access existing legal pathways.
2. Those with limited capital and weak networks will need targeted support to strengthen their networks and allow flexibility regarding access to third countries, namely via complementary pathways.
3. Those with high protection needs because of limited to no relevant capital or networks continue to rely primarily on resettlement.

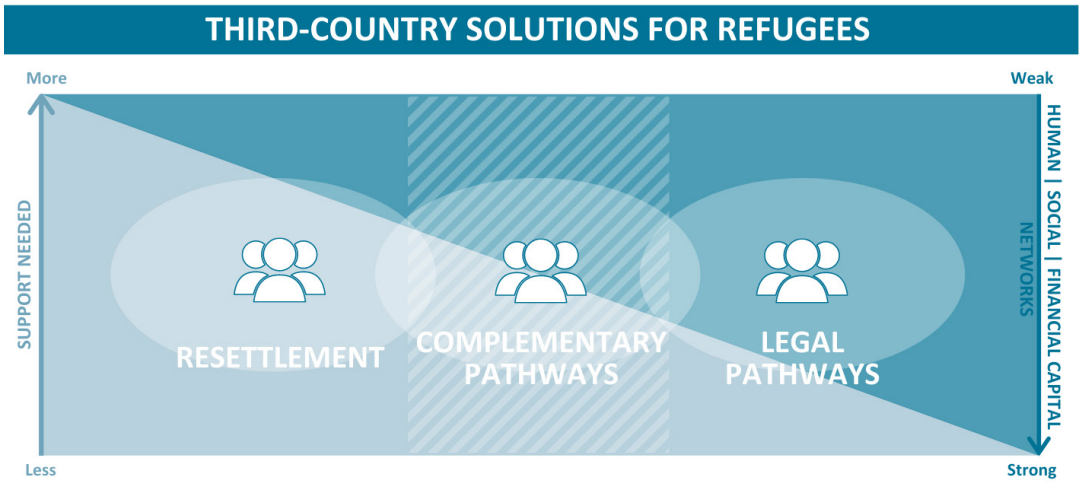

Figure 2: The correlation between networks, capital and third-country solutions for refugees
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Strong human, social and/or financial capital—Little to no support is needed

There is a significant number of refugees who never enter the refugee protection regime. Their human and social capital, in the form of family, social or professional networks, allows them to move from countries of persecution or war to safety, arriving (or, as 'refugees sur place', already staying) in EU countries on residence permits based on work, family or education. Despite several shortcomings with available data, a 2021 OECD–UNHCR study mapped the residence permits issued by OECD countries and Brazil to citizens of seven major source countries of refugees with high recognition rates, namely Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Venezuela, which together were the source of 62 per cent of displaced persons in 2019 (OECD & UNHCR, 2021). According to their calculation, nearly 1.5 million first-time residence permits were granted between 2010 and 2019 to citizens of these countries on the grounds of family, work or study. Of these permits, 67 per cent were granted for family reasons, 18 per cent were given for study, and 13 per cent were granted for work purposes (OECD & UNHCR, 2021).

In comparison, during this same period, nationals of these seven countries submitted four million asylum applications, 2.2 million people were granted refugee status or subsidiary protection, and 572,000 refugees were resettled to OECD countries and Brazil (OECD & UNHCR, 2021).

Following this exercise and based on Eurostat data on first-time residence permits issued for major source countries of refugees with a high protection need (determined by a recognition rate of above 50 per cent), one can see that citizens from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Somalia and Yemen also make significant use of legal pathways to come to Europe (see Table 1). More relevant, however, may be that they outnumber—by far—refugees who are resettled.

Above all, these numbers show that refugees use existing pathways and seek individual solutions outside of the refugee regime—if their resources and networks allow them to do so.

	Number of residence permits (2010–2019)				Number of refugees resettled	Total positive decisions* and recognition rate	
	Family	Work	Education	Total	2010-2019	2010-2019	
Syria	257,834	10,497	13,986	**282,317**	**54,050**	**991,270**	94%
Afghanistan	61,696	1,632	3,014	**66,342**	**4,240**	**270,085**	52%
Iraq	91,228	7,007	6,580	**104,815**	**3,345**	**213,835**	58%
Eritrea	36,442	319	499	**37,260**	**6,660**	**131,245**	89%
Somalia	46,414	153	393	**46,960**	**4,420**	**90,165**	64%
Yemen	4,264	595	3,312	**8,171**	**70**	**9,330**	81%

Table 1: Overview of different refugee pathways
Source: Eurostat; *: refugee, subsidiary and humanitarian protection

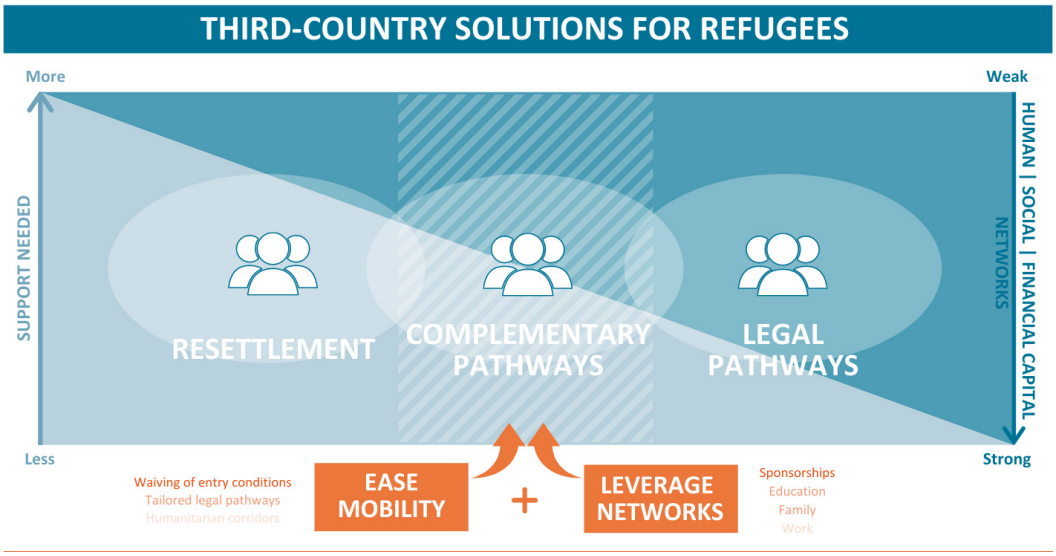

Figure 3: Policy implications for complementary pathways
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No to very weak human, social and/or financial capital—High level of support is needed

At the other end of the spectrum, many displaced people possess neither the financial means nor the necessary human or social capital. This makes them most vulnerable to becoming stuck in protracted displacement situations and limits their chances of finding safety. The international protection regime developed a very special system to compensate for the lack of financial means or capital among the most vulnerable—the instrument of resettlement, one of the durable solutions for refugees. Conceived as a protection tool, it offers the greatest support to the most vulnerable by offering an organised system well embedded in the international protection framework and overseen by a specialised agency, UNHCR. However, only 0.5 per cent of the 20.4 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate worldwide were resettled in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020, p. 48), illustrating that the need far exceeds the opportunity. And this need is growing: In 2021, UNHCR estimates that global resettlement needs will slightly increase to 1,445,383 persons as compared to 1,440,408 in 2020 (UNHCR, 2020b).

Limited human, social and/or financial capital—Targeted support is needed

Finally, there is the group of refugees who may not be among the most vulnerable and who are thus not targeted for resettlement, but whose human or social capital may not be strong enough to facilitate independent access to solutions abroad. For instance, they may have family members abroad with whom they wish to unite, but they may not be related closely enough to qualify for the narrow family definition that allows for family reunification. These refugees may possess education or skills in demand in other countries but lack the necessary network, financial means or knowledge of how to access such opportunities or even to make their skills known to potential employers. This, for instance, holds true for a significant share of persons living in situations of protracted displacement in Jordan (see Tobin et al., 2021) and Ethiopia (see Tufa et al., 2021). It is this group of people with limited human and social capital for whom complementary pathways could become a game-changer. Well placed, complementary pathways could step in to provide a network where they are lacking or strengthen networks that are too weak. In this context, complementary pathways could allow refugees to utilise their human capital if mobility is added to the equation—facilitated, for instance, via family links or work or education channels.

Thus, it becomes clear that tapping into the potential of complementary pathways does not necessarily demand new pathways. What it requires, however, is that policymakers invest in:

1 building and leveraging quality networks to enable displaced people to utilise their resources, and
2 adjusting entry conditions by making visa regulations more flexible and reducing bureaucracy.

4 Policy implications: Networks + mobility = complementary pathways

Complementary pathways are high on the agenda at the global and EU level. Yet much uncertainty remains regarding the use—and ultimate impact—of this tool. States are often reluctant to introduce new pathways, which might be but one of the reasons why complementary pathways receive much attention from academics but far less from national governments. Additionally, complementary pathways suffer from an understandable but ill-advised divide between refugees, who are understood as primarily in need of protection, and migrants, who are seen as moving for economic, educational or private reasons. This divide is strongly reflected in national migration management systems and presents a formidable challenge for determining responsibility for a tool like complementary pathways, which caters to the "legal mobility" of "refugees". If this divide can be successfully overcome, complementary pathways could become a successful tool in the future.

5 Conclusions: Six ways to move forward on complementary pathways

The increased interest around complementary pathways, combined with the abovementioned examples, show that it is a promising way for expanding solutions for refugees. However, basing complementary pathways on refugees' capital and networks in many ways remains to be tapped and tested.The points below highlight ways that European Union and other policymakers can make better use of this instrument.

First, in **acknowledging the human and social capital** that refugees possess, complementary pathways could become a tool that offers refugees the possibility to seize opportunities based on their skills and networks.

Second, refugees have social and professional networks, which are often too weak to capitalise on. Complementary pathways in this context shall set up networking strategies to make refugees' connections stronger. **Networks in receiving countries** may develop further around the community sponsorship schemes that are gaining increased momentum, as this approach encourages and allows for flexible refugee support networks. These networks can be based on communities, individuals, employers, universities, faith groups or civil society. They may also be broadened to encompass family sponsorship schemes and thus widen the possibilities for family reunification, even if the tight definition of family would normally not allow for this. Networks in receiving countries, however also require corresponding structures in **key countries of first asylum**, where refugees can connect, for instance, to learn about education and employment opportunities and to navigate the required bureaucracy—a potential new area of action for development actors and embassies of potential refugee-receiving countries.

Third, refugees whose human or social capital offer them the prospect of a livelihood in a third country, such as being received by a community or having reasonable prospects of employment, should also be met with **more flexibility regarding their entry conditions**. A sense of flexibility shall not provide new refugee-specific pathways with more exclusive mobility rights but should rather extend to waiving entry conditions of existing pathways that may be difficult for refugees to fulfil (e.g. because of a lack of required documentation) and thus constitute the main hindrance to a third-country solution.

Fourth, current governance structures segregate the admission of refugees from that of other legal migrants. Complementary pathways for refugees are orphans in this governance structure, as they organisationally fit neither under the former nor the latter. Furthermore, investing in network opportunities for refugees requires initiatives in Europe and first countries of asylum, demanding policies that encompass the EU's internal and external dimension and involve different actors (DG HOME and DG INTPA). Progress on complementary pathways, therefore, requires actors to **overcome sectoral governance approaches** and seek synergies between these areas.

Fifth, the **connection of networks and facilitated admission opportunities for refugees**, as proposed in this brief, could build on lessons learned from initiatives such as the German Western Balkans Regulation. Additionally, further research on the legal pathways that people from major refugee source countries take without entering the refugee regime may inform policies that can help strengthen refugee networks to leverage complementary pathways to protection.

Sixth and finally, **enabling refugees to capitalise upon their resources, connections and skills to access third-country solutions** could, in turn, create more space for those refugees who are lacking social, human and financial capital and who need more support from the international community—ultimately enabling these pathways to become truly complementary instruments for refugees to access protection.

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